

Raleigh, NC - Good afternoon! I am honored to share this stage with so many leaders who have served our state and our nation with such distinction. . . and to share this room with the many Citizen Soldiers, first responders, elected officials, and public servants who work day-in and day-out to keep us strong and resilient. Secretary Richardson, we are particularly happy to welcome you to North Carolina today. I also want to recognize my friend Bob Etheridge, who played a key role in this effort as a member of Congress and more recently served as the Governor's point person for the Recovery Act in North Carolina.

The famous quipster (and Army veteran) Cullen Hightower once remarked that "talk is cheap – except when Congress does it." So I choose my words carefully when I say that this is truly a momentous occasion. Looking around the room, I cannot recall a single time when I was prouder to call North Carolina home. It would take a full hour to acknowledge everybody who deserves recognition for being here today. So rather than subject you to the formalities, I'd like to briefly recount the timeline of events that produced this impressive facility, acknowledging some of those whose efforts made it possible along the way.

Rarely do the needs of our nation, our state, and our community coincide as perfectly as they did in the case of this building. For the greater part of a decade, the men and women of the North Carolina National Guard had gone above and beyond the call of duty, facing repeated combat deployments and an expanding set of domestic response and recovery requirements. As they always have, our Citizen Soldiers performed their duty without question or complaint. But their leaders were operating in a cramped, crumbling building that was simply inadequate to the task – as were their counterparts at the Division of Emergency Management.

The solution was obvious: a new Joint Forces Headquarters building that would not only give the National Guard a facility befitting its expanding role, but would also bring together our state's law enforcement and emergency management community under one roof, promoting coordination and a sense of common purpose.

Unfortunately, obvious solutions don't always gain traction in the arcane world of Pentagon budgeting. For years, General Bill Ingram – whom we're delighted to have back with us today in his new capacity as Director of the U.S. Army National Guard – had made the case internally that a new facility was needed. And for years, I had chipped away at it on the congressional side, working to include language in the annual Military Construction spending bill urging the Pentagon to prioritize the project. But despite our best efforts, the project was left off or far down the list that governs the Pentagon's construction priorities.

Then the global financial crisis sent the U.S. economy into a tailspin, and we entered 2009 bleeding hundreds of thousands of jobs a month. In states such as North Carolina that had experienced rapid growth before the bubble burst, the recession hit the construction industry especially hard, and thousands of workers suddenly found themselves with nothing to build. President Obama came to office determined to stop the bleeding, and the first major act of the 111th Congress was to enact the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act in February of 2009. As of last fall, up to 2.4 million Americans owed their jobs to the Recovery Act, according to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office.

But the Recovery Act wasn't just about creating jobs, and it certainly wasn't about the federal government showering its largesse indiscriminately on states and localities. It was about investing in the right kind of projects – projects that would both create jobs in the short term and meet critical national needs in the long term. State and local partners needed to be ready, willing, and able to act – and to act quickly.

That is where the North Carolina National Guard came in. There was nobody in the country better prepared to act when the moment of opportunity arose than General Ingram and his team. Before the Recovery Act was even a glimmer in the President's eye, Colonel Tom Harris – who I hope is resting easy in his retirement – was in touch with my staff to suggest that the Joint Forces Headquarters be considered for inclusion in any supplemental appropriations bills that Congress might pass.

I needed no persuading, and – with the help of my former staff member, Tommy Ross, who could not be here today because he is now the Senate Majority Leader's senior defense advisor – I made the case to the Chairman of the Military Construction Appropriations Subcommittee, my good friend and former colleague Chet Edwards.

Chet was an exemplary chairman – one of the best we've had – and America's men and women in uniform and veterans continue to benefit from his efforts. I'm deeply gratified that he has flown in from Texas to join us today. Chet, I hope you like what you see, because none of this would have been possible without your strategizing and support.

Meanwhile, General Ingram ran the traps at the Pentagon, and Governor Beverly Perdue – newly inaugurated and already focusing like a laser on bringing North Carolina's economy back

– did her part by making sure the State's contribution was secure. She also made the case directly to President Obama that this was a top priority for North Carolina. It became clear that if we could just be sure that the Recovery Act included some funding for Army National Guard construction, we had a pretty good idea of where it would go.

It wasn't easy, but at the end of the day we ended up with \$50 million in the bill – about 80 percent of which went to this project. I was also pleased to secure \$2 million in additional funding through Homeland Security appropriations bills to help pay for the state-of-the-art Emergency Operations Center downstairs.

Now, less than three years since we broke ground on this spot, we can see what a worthy investment it has been. General Lusk, we congratulate you on seeing the project through to the end. Not only will our state's National Guardsmen and first responders finally have the headquarters they deserve, but the project created or sustained an estimated 3,400 jobs along the way and generated over \$40 million for the local economy, from the building design down to the light bulbs.

In short, this Joint Forces Headquarters is exactly what we had in mind when we passed the Recovery Act: a collaborative venture among local, state, and federal stakeholders that both meets a critical need and generates well-paying jobs and economic growth along the way. Congratulations to all of you on a job well done. This facility is a tribute to your efforts, and the real, enduring reward for all of us who have been involved is that it will strengthen your ability to serve the citizens of North Carolina and of our country.